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Spooky Houses in Western Fiction: From Poe's House of Usher to Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

Houses have played an important (thematic and/or allegorical) role in Western fiction during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – right up to the present day. In Jungian terms the house can be viewed as an architectural model of the self (such as he formulates it in his *Contributions to Analytical Psychology*, 1927, i.e. in the essay "Mind and the Earth"):

> we have [. . .] to describe and to explain a building the upper storey of which was erected in the nineteenth century; the ground-floor dates from the sixteenth century, and a careful examination of the masonry discloses the fact that it was reconstructed from a dwelling-tower of the eleventh century. In the cellar we discover Roman foundation walls, and under the cellar a filled-in cave, in the floor of which stone tools are found, and remains of glacial fauna in the layers below. That would be a sort of picture of our mental structure. (Jung 1928: 118–19)

In the present paper I shall focus primarily on a number of haunted houses in Western fiction – from the Gothic mansion in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and the derelict priory in H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" (1923, 1924) to more recent thematic examples like the monstrous, scary and/or oversized/hyperbolic buildings in novels such as Stacey Levine's *Dra-* (1997) or Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000, 2001). And quite a few of these houses furthermore hover between the realm of allegory (like the Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas' *The House in the Dark*, 1945, 1976) and the realm of *poésie pure* (like William Goyen's *The House of Breath*, 1949).

According to Gaston Bachelard, commenting on architectural spaces and their symbolic connotations in *The Poetics of Space* (1958, 1964, 1994), the heights and the depths are certainly imbued with quite explicit connotations, i.e. to the extent that "the rationality of the roof" is opposed to "the irrationality of the cellar" and to the extent that "[i]n the attic, the day's experiences can always efface the fears of the night. In the cellar, darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing

on the dark walls" (Bachelard 1994: 18–19).[1] Furthermore, the cellar "is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths" (Bachelard 1994: 18).[2]

Whereas Bachelard focuses primarily on the house as a sheltered space – or as a "major zone of protection" (Bachelard 1994: 31)[3] – Sigmund Freud tends to be thematically preoccupied with the *spooky* or *uncanny* qualities of the house, which he exemplifies in his seminal essay "The Uncanny" ("Das Unheimliche" 1919). In his initial discussion of the etymology of the German word *unheimlich* Freud thus notices that "*heimlich* [i.e. homely or cosy] is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich* [i.e. uncanny]. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a subspecies of *heimlich* [which incidentally also means *secret*]" (Freud 1985: 347).[4] In this context we must therefore bear in mind that home and hearth can easily become uncanny or haunted places. Whereas the Victorian domicile is usually regarded as the *castle* of the bourgeois patriarch (according to the formula: "My home is my castle") – and this homestead is furthermore inhabited by the "angel in the house" (in Coventry Patmore's phrase), i.e. by a highly idealized and spiritualized housewife and mother – the aforementioned Freudian reflections implicitly undermine the ideological underpinnings of such a self-complacent set-up (as well as the character armour

[1] "on peut opposer la rationalité du toit à l'irrationalité de la cave" (Bachelard 1998: 35) and "Au grenier, l'expérience du jour peut toujours effacer les peurs de la nuit. A la cave les ténèbres demeurent jour et nuit. Même avec le bougeoir à la main, l'homme à la cave voit danser les ombres sur la noire muraille" (Bachelard 1998: 36).

[2] "mais [la cave] est d'abord l'être obscur de la maison, l'être qui participe aux puissances souterraines. En y rêvant, on s'accorde à l'irrationalité des profondeurs" (Bachelard 1998: 35). As has been pointed out by feminist critics, the Bachelardian model of the psyche may reflect what looks (primarily) like a patriarchal outlook, for of course, *madwomen in the attic* (*pace* Gilbert and Gubar and others) appear to disprove the very notion of the "rationality of the roof;" in Leonora Carrington's short story "The Sisters" (1939, 1942) Drusille's bird-like and vampyristic sister Juniper is thus precisely placed in the attic: "Perched on a rod near the ceiling, an extraordinay creature looked at the light with blinded eyes. Her body was white and naked, feathers grew from her shoulders and round her breasts. Her white arms were neither wings nor arms. A mass of white hair fell around her face, whose flesh was like marble" (Leonora Carrington: *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales*, New York: E. P. Dutton, 1988, p. 44).

[3] Bachelard refers to the house in Henri Bachelin's *Le serviteur* as "une zone de protection majeure" (Bachelard 1998: 45).

[4] "Also heimlich ist ein Wort, das seine Bedeutung nach einer Ambivalenz entwickelt, bis es endlich mit seinem Gegensatz unheimlich zusammenfällt. Unheimlich ist irgendwie eine Art von heimlich" (Freud 1982: 250).

of the master of the house). In "The Uncanny" Freud also takes up some aspects of the way(s) in which houses are portrayed in a literary context, and in this connection he thematizes the architectural uncanny in the following passage:

> In the middle of the isolation of war-time a number of the English *Strand Magazine* fell into my hands; and, among other somewhat redundant matter, I read a story about a young married couple who move into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. Towards evening an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house; they stumble over something in the dark; they seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs – in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place, or that the wooden monsters come to life in the dark, or something of the sort. It was a naïve enough story, but the uncanny feeling it produced was quite remarkable. (Freud 1985: 367)[5]

Freud is not very accurate with regard to his literary source (he does not indicate what issue of the *Strand Magazine* he had found his story in); but later scholars have found out that the story in question was L. G. Moberly's "Inexplicable" published in volume 54 of *Strand Magazine* in 1917. According to Nicholas Royle (2003: 141, note 5), "Lucy Gertrude Moberly was an author of many novels, published in the early decades of the twentieth century; largely forgotten now, they were regularly reviewed, for example, in the *Times Literary Supplement*." Freud is also somewhat inaccurate when he characterizes the domicile of the young couple in "Inexplicable" as a "furnished house." Royle points out that:

> In fact, it is a significant and emphatic point in the story that the house is very much a house (a property so substantial, indeed, that it transpires to have its own "cottage at the end of the garden" (p. 579)), and that it is *not* furnished: the mystery is why the owner or owners, or previous tenant or tenants, have left the table behind. In other words, whether through misremembering or misrepresentation, it is more

[5] "Mitten in der Absperrung des Weltkrieges kam eine Nummer des englischen Magazins *Strand* in meine Hände, in der ich unter anderen ziemlich überflüssigen Produktonen eine Erzählung las, wie ein junges Paar eine möblierte Wohnung bezieht, in der sich ein seltsam geformter Tisch mit holzgeschnitzten Krokodilen befindet. Gegen Abend pflegt sich dann ein unerträglicher, charakteristischer Gestank in der Wohnung zu verbreiten, man stolpert im Dunkeln über etwas, man glaubt zu sehen, wie etwas Undefinierbares über die Treppe huscht, kurz, man soll erraten, dass infolge der Anwesenheit dieses Tisches gespenstige Krokodile im Hause spuken oder dass die hölzernen Scheusale im Dunkeln Leben bekommen oder etwas Ähnliches. Es war eine recht einfältige Geschichte, aber ihre unheimliche Wirkung verspürte man als ganz hervorragend" (Freud 1982: 267).

> specifically the case of a "haunted house" ("*ein Haus in dem es spukt* [. . .]") than Freud's summary might seem to suggest. (Royle 2003: 135)[6]

The uncanny – or magical – object, i.e. the carved table, thus becomes the thematic centre of the plot; and the rest of the furniture becomes literally inessential, insofar as the table with the spooky crocodiles takes up all the narrative space, as it were. The "bestial" underpinnings of civilized life in middle-class England are thus explicitly thematized.

The Decline and Fall of the Gothic Manor-House from Edgar Allan Poe to H. P. Lovecraft

In *The Gothic Revival: An Essay in the History of Taste* (1928, 1983) the English art historian Kenneth Clark comments on the widespread rehabilitation of so-called "Gothic" elements in eighteenth-century architecture and the way(s) in which ruins were cultivated by the nobility and the landed gentry during the same period; as a matter of fact, sham ruins were actually built [*as* ruins] by enterprising architects in eighteenth-century England, and according to Kenneth Clark (1983: 48–49),

> [i]t would be interesting to know when the first Gothic ruins were built. [Horace] Walpole mentions one by Gibbs, which seems more improbable; but we know that Kent used the style, and I am inclined to make him responsible, for it was he who rebelled against the formal garden and brought into fashion romantic irregularities [. . . However,] the earliest [ruin] for which we have a date was built in 1746. It was the work of Sanderson Miller, an amateur architect of Radway, Warwickshire, and was built in his grounds at Edgehill [. . .] For all their forlorn absurdity, Miller's sham ruins show knowledge of medieæval architecture, and at least they are of stone. His rich clients could afford this concession to realism. But the average country gentleman gratified his imagination more cheaply: his ruins were of plaster or canvas.

[6] Cf. also on Freud's reading of Moberly's story Robin Lydenberg, "Freud's Uncanny Narratives," *PMLA* 112 (October 1997): 1072–1086. As for L. G. Moberly's story cf. L. G. Moberly: "Inexplicable," illustrated by Dudley Tennant, *Strand Magazine* 54 (1917): 572–81. Cf. also *Seekers of Dreams: Masterpieces of Fantasy*. Ed. & with Notes by Douglas A. Anderson (Cold Spring Harbor, NY: Cold Spring Press, 2005), pp. 241–52. The story is also reprinted in *Strange Tales from the Strand*. Selected and introduced by Jack Adrian. Foreword by Julian Symons (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 (first published in 1991)), pp. 183–95. We notice that in this story – as in so many other classic examples of the fantastic – the everyday world and its would-be "normal" codes are in a spectacular manner undermined by "inexplicable" (allegedly supernatural) events, i.e. events that somehow disrupt the "natural" order of things.

The picturesque style exemplified by these sham ruins is omnipresent in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England (and to a certain extent also in the United States); and in 1839 Edgar Allan Poe certainly alludes to this would-be Gothic tradition in "The Fall of the House of Usher." In a certain sense, it may be argued that those who built ruins had anticipated or pre-figured the eventual decline and downfall of the *ancien régime*, as it were – which is, of course, precisely the ultimate outcome of the plot in "The Fall of the House of Usher," when

> the barely-perceptible fissure" in the front wall of the manor-house in the last paragraph of the story "rapidly widened – there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind – the entire orb of the satellite [i.e. the blood-red moon] burst at once upon my sight – my brain reeled as I saw the mighty wall rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of thousand waters – and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "*House of Usher.*" (Poe 2000: 417)

Thus we notice how *the depths swallow up the heights* (the "tarn" swallows up the House of Usher). But this downward urge has already been foregrounded in various ways earlier in the story, e.g. when Roderick Usher (the lord of the manor-house) and his friend (the first-person narrator) bury Madeline (Roderick's apparently dead sister) "in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (Poe 2000: 409), i.e. carrying out what amounts to a "temporary entombment" (allegedly taking into consideration the unusual character of her malady [is she *quite* dead?] and presumably also taking into consideration what amounts to a well-founded fear of grave-robbers) (Poe 2000: 409). When Roderick and his friend place Madeline's "corpse" within this "vault" deep down within the main building, her body is certainly positioned on the level of what Gaston Bachelard terms "the *dark entity* of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces" (cf. the passage from *The Poetics of Space*, referring to the "topology" of the cellar or basement, quoted earlier in the present paper).

However this may be, the depths and their vaults are also thematized by Roderick Usher in his exertions as a painter:

> [a] small picture represented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel [cf. the vault where Madeline is buried (!)], with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of

> intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly yet inappropriate splendor. (Poe 2000: 405–6)

Darkness itself is thus suffused with a mysterious aura of its own (its luminosity or "inappropriate splendor" is certainly against nature), which in its own way also adds to the spooky character of the whole set-up. And within this setting we are not at all surprised that the borderline between life and death itself can be transgressed – which takes place, when Madeline returns from her "temporary" entombment and brings about the death of her brother as well as the final downfall of the House of Usher (when the whole building is swallowed up by the "tarn").

Edgar Allan Poe was undoubtedly the great precursor to H. P. Lovecraft (to adopt Harold Bloom's terminology). As Lovecraft (2000: 43) himself formulates it in his *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (first published in 1927):

> Truly it may be said that Poe invented the short story in its present form. His elevation of disease, perversity, and decay to the level of artistically expressible themes was likewise infinitely far-reaching in effect; for avidly seized, sponsored, and intensified by his eminent French admirer Charles Pierre Baudelaire, it became the nucleus of the principal aesthetic movements in France, thus making Poe in a sense the father of the Decadents and the Symbolists.

Lovecraft also refers to Nathaniel Hawthorne's archetypal *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), and in this connection it is interesting to notice that he focuses on the metaphysics (or poetics) of the house in weird fiction: "The overshadowing malevolence of the ancient house – almost as alive as Poe's House of Usher, though in a subtler way – pervades the tale as a recurrent motif pervades an operatic tragedy" (2000: 49). In Lovecraft's own short story "The Rats in the Walls" (written in 1923, published in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales* in March 1924) a similar "malevolent" house (i.e. Exham Priory, rebuilt by its present owner, the first-person narrator) is placed at the centre of the plot. However this may be, it turns out that beneath the re-constructed priory there are further layers of architectural remains. A company of archaeological explorers discover downstairs

> a twilit grotto of enormous height, stretching away farther than any eye could see; a subterraneous world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestion. There were buildings and other architectural remains – in one terrified glance I saw a weird pattern of tumuli, a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood – but all these were

> dwarfed by the ghoulish spectacle presented by the general surface of the ground. For yards about the steps [down into this grotto] extended an insane tangle of human bones, or bones at least as human as those on the steps. (Lovecraft 2002: 105)

Here we are once more reminded of C. G. Jung's model of the human psyche in his *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* (1927), where the chronological development of the human mind is portrayed as an instance of layering, as it were. And in the second-last paragraph of Lovecraft's story this descent into the past is signalized as a linguistic *déroute* (or a linguistic break-down), where the first-person narrator traces a trajectory through a succession of languages, comprising archaic English, Middle English, Latin, and Gaelic, back to primitive grunts or a primal scream: " 'Sblood, thou stinkard, I'll learn ye how to gust . . . wolde ye swynke me thilke wys? . . . *Magna Mater! Magna Mater!* . . . *Atys . . . Dia ad aghaidh 's adodann . . . agus bas dunach ort! Dhonas's dholas ort, agus leat-sa! . . . Ungl . . . ungl . . . rrrlh . . . chchch . . .*" (Lovecraft 2002: 108). According to S. T. Joshi (Lovecraft's modern editor), the Gaelic text has been borrowed by Lovecraft from Joseph Lewis French's *The Best Psychic Stories* (1920) and translated by Fiona Macleod (alias William Sharp) as follows, "God against thee and in thy face . . . and may a death of woe be yours . . . Evil and sorrow to thee and thine" (Lovecraft 2002: 384 note 33). The Gaelic passage is thus a curse, and we notice how the declarative and/or informative aspects of language are gradually toned down, whereas interjectional and/or purely "magical" uses of language become more and more important.

Ghostly Modernities in the Allegorical and the Poetical Modes

The allegorical mode has quite often been taken up in modernist fiction – and as far as the house metaphor is concerned, we notice that its history as an allegorical topos can at least be traced back to the Middle Ages, where John Gower's House of Sleep (in his *Confessio Amantis*, ca. 1390) and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Hous of Fame* (probably written between 1379 and 1380) exemplify this trend. In modernist fiction we might mention Karel Capek's *The War with the Newts* (1936) and Leonora Carrington's *The House of Fear* (*La Maison de la peur*, written 1937–38, published in 1938, with illustrations by Max Ernst) as twentieth-century examples of the allegorical mode.

The Norwegian writer Tarjei Vesaas (1899–1970) makes allegorical use of the house topos in *The House in the Dark* (*Huset i mörkret*, 1945; English translation in 1976) – a novel about the German occupation of Norway (1940–1945),

written during the last months of the Second World War. According to Tarjei Vesaas's English translator Elizabeth Rokkan,

> *The House in the Dark* was written in Norway during the Second World War in unusual circumstances [...] By 1945 no one doubted that the war would soon be over, but in Occupied Norway there was much uncertainty as to how it would end [...]. [According to Vesaas's wife, Haldis Moren Vesaas] [t]hat winter and spring of 1945 [Tarjei Vesaas] worked more steadily than he had ever done before, or would do later [...]. [When the manuscript was finished] [h]e made a solid zinc box for it, and buried it among the trees above the lake. Afterwards he took me [i.e. Haldis Moren Vesaas] there and showed me where he had hidden it, so that I should be able to find it again if he himself were gone when the time came to have it published. (Vesaas 1976: 7–8)

According to Elizabeth Rokkan, the novel may be characterized as "[p]art allegory, part parable," and on one level it "describes the drab lives of the inhabitants of an enormous house that has suffered a catastrophe of supernatural dimensions; on another [level] it depicts the struggle against the forces of darkness in poetic terms, combining biblical echoes with highly modern symbols" (Vesaas 1976: 9). From the very outset the "bewitched house" in question is portrayed as follows:

> Here, beneath a single, gigantic, convex roof, are collected countless rooms and corridors and narrow passages, cut off from the rest of the world by dense, oppressive darkness. There are open courtyards inside this extensive house, but the darkness lies over it all like a crushing weight. If anyone were foolish enough to climb up on to the roof in an attempt to see something, he would simply feel as if his eyes had been torn out. He would come down again quickly and crawl away home. (Vesaas 1976: 11)[7]

Arrows point in the direction of the centre of this enormous building – an obvious allusion to the totalitarian character (or aura) of this régime. What goes on in a totalitarian society can be characterized as (literally) unidirectional (or unidimensional). But at the same time the Resistance attempts to undermine the power of the centre by digging tunnels right up to the very centre ("The hidden

[7] Referring to "eit forgjort hus": "Her er det samla, under eit einaste bylgjande kjempe-tak, tallause rom og gangar og smog – og skild frå all verda med eit tett, tungt mørker. Her er opne gårdsrom inni dette vide huset, men mørkret ligg over alt som ei krasande vekt. Om noken i ørske kleiv opp på taket for å få eit glimt av eitkvart, så ville det berre kjennast som augo var stungne ut. Han ville koma fort ned att og krabbe inn til seg sjølv" (Vesaas 1945: 7).

tunnelling goes right up to the hidden centre," Vesaas 1976: 31).[8] Occasionally an uncanny van picks up some of these freedom fighters (sometimes they are killed afterwards, sometimes they are incarcerated). At the end of the novel, one of the resistance fighters (Peter) realizes that "[h]is way ends here" (i.e. in front of a wall) – even if "events are [by now] moving in favour of the living" (and the occupation army is going to give up its stronghold very soon) (Vessas 1976: 282).[9]

According to Tzvetan Todorov in his famous study *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973, an English translation of his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, 1970), allegory is more or less diametrically opposed to poetry (and both are opposed to the fantastic proper). However, it may nevertheless be argued that allegory – in some respects – also bears a certain resemblance to the fantastic (*The House in the Dark*, with its Kafkaesque underpinnings, could also be characterized as a fantastic novel).[10] However this may be, a novel like William Goyen's *House of Breath* (1949) to a certain extent likewise belongs to two different (generic or modal) fields, i.e. it is both a fantastic narrative (focusing on the dream of flying) and an example of *poésie pure*. Eve La Salle Caram (2004: 36) in her article "From the Earth Itself: The Yearning Voices of *The House of Breath*" comments on the elemental lore of *The House of Breath*, ending up with a reference to "the yearning lyricism that seems to come out of the earth itself in all the voices." What she focuses on in the passage just quoted is the multivocal or polyphonic set-up of the novel as such (*pace* Mikhail Bakhtin).

But of course, as the very title of the novel indicates, air and earth appear to be competing forces within the poetical universe of the novel. We may likewise notice a subtle dialectic between the heights and the depths in this novel, where David Cowart (1997: 9) has noticed a remarkable downward urge (associated with the house topos, cf. Bachelard's reflections quoted earlier), insofar as "the archetypal descent into the depths – whether of well, river, or cellar, whether of self or time – is something not unique to the sensitive narrator [i.e. Boy]. Granny Ganchion [the grandmother] descends into her cellar to commune with Old Fuzz the worm."

[8] "Like fram til den løynde midten går den løynde boringa" (Vessas 1945: 31).

[9] "Vegen hans vil ende *her*." But "[o]ver einstad brest det i det ladde huset. Men går mot det levande" (Vesaas 1945: 339).

[10] On the relationship between these two genres or modes see also Peter Cersowsky, "Allegory and the Fantastic in Literature: Poe's 'The Masque of the Red Death' and Alfred Kubin's 'The Other Side,'" *Sprachkunst. Beiträge zur Literaturwissenschaft*, Vol. 13. 1. Halbband (1982): 141–42.

Postmodernism and Its Discontents: From Stacey Levine's *Dra-* (1997) to Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* (2000, 2001)

The American critic Matthew Stadler (1997: 1) notices in his review in *The Stranger* (March 9, 1997) that in Stacey Levine's Kafkaesque novel *Dra-* (1997) "the nondescript heroine of this grim, hilarious fiction, might have fallen through the same hole as Lewis Carroll's Alice, only now, 130 years later, there [']s no time for frivolity, just the pressing need to get a job." However, the female applicant (Dra-) very soon loses her way inside the monstrous, oversized building, where the Employment Office is situated, for its architectural ground plan appears to be almost impossible to chart. When Dra- at a certain point in the development of the plot has got access to the roof of the building (we may bear in mind that this turned out to be *impossible* for those who frequented Tarjei Vesaas's *House in the Dark*), even this place turns out to be infinitely more convoluted and impossible to survey than one should have thought:

> The dark, miles-long roof was covered by another roof and so on, the top roof being unreachable in all ways; and as she walked towards the elevators, she passed a small niche that contained an open-walled guard station, though it did not contain a guard, but instead two figures struggling unpleasantly beneath a cloak, and she turned away. (Levine 1997: 60)

The bureaucratic weightiness (and density) of the whole place is obvious:

> Despite the silence of these halls, there were, she knew, thousands upon thousands of employees everywhere, not visible now, but hard at work instead, gathered in small stifled work centers, basements, and sub-basements; night stations, corridors, and portable and permanent work areas; work vaults, niches for special projects, and training hutches connected by hallways just inches across that stuttered in one direction then another before widening into empty classrooms lined by shelves full of sheets and old surgical equipment. (Levine 1997: 13–14)

The convoluted spaces and claustrophobic atmosphere of this building, with its "hallways just inches across that stuttered in one direction then another," remind us of classic Gothic scenarios with their winding, subterranean corridors and secret passages, their hidden vaults and prison-cells placed down below (we are also reminded of Kafka's *The Castle*, 1924, and Borgesian narratives like "The Library of Babel," 1941).

We notice the intertextual set-up of *Dra-*; in accordance with the poetological premises of postmodernist fiction it always refers to other texts. This is

stressed in an even more spectacular manner in one of the most recent examples of the playful use of the house topos, namely Mark Z. Danielewski's highly experimental *portmanteau* novel *House of Leaves* (2000, 2001). In this novel the house literally spreads out and takes up all available space (and a little more than that): the house in question continually expands, attempting to swallow up lodgers and visitors alike in the process. The complicated narrative structure of the text (an ingenious Chinese box system) presents us with a whole series of (heavily loaded) meta-textual or meta-fictional appendixes (offshoots from the main narrative, if there actually *is* such a fictional core). According to Will Slocombe, the text itself is not only indebted to the American Gothic tradition, but also to Derridean reading strategies, and

> [t]his reading method can entail anything that leads to a deferment, whether mirrors, ghosts, echoes, supplements and annotations, or absences [. . . and] [w]hile *House of Leaves* is full of such tropes, and could thus be read as a deconstructive text, it is important to realize that while *House of Leaves* uses deconstructive strategy, its primary aim is to undo the violent hierarchy of its own existence. The House, both as house and text, seeks to unwrite its own creation, and this reflexive destruction of its own axioms demonstrates an important aspect of nihilism and the primary difference between deconstruction and nihilism. (Slocombe 2005: 92)

The murderous house in *House of Leaves* certainly reminds us of similar houses in Poe and Lovecraft (the House of Usher, the priory in "The Rats in the Walls," etc.). According to Will Slocombe (2005: 104), "this nihilistic space functions in the manner akin to a black hole, seeking to absorb all traces of [Heideggerian] Being with which it is presented [. . .] As the nihilistic space of the House expands, it kills [the protagonist] Navidson's brother, Tom [. . .] 'literally' swallowing him."[11]

Whatever is on the agenda here, the Lovecraftian characteristics of the House are pretty obvious, and this becomes quite clear when the explorer/filmmaker Navidson appears to be locked up within this claustrophobic structure for good:

> As he sits on the edge, he beholds a strange and very disconcerting sight. No more than twenty feet below is the surface of an incredibly clear liquid. Navidson

[11] According to N. Katherine Hayes (2004: 779), the palimpsestic characteristics of *House of Leaves* are obvious: "Rather than trying to penetrate cultural constructions to reach an original object of inquiry, *House of Leaves* uses the very multilayered inscriptions that create it as a physical artifact to imagine the subject as a palimpsest, emerging not behind but through the inscriptions that bring the book into being."

> presumes it is water though he senses it is somewhat more viscous. By some peculiar quality intrinsic to itself, this liquid does not impede but actually clarifies the impossible vision of what lies beneath: a long shaft descending for miles ultimately opening up into a black bottomless pit which instantly fills Navidson with an almost crippling sense of dread. (Danielewski 2001: 398)[12]

Kristevan abjection (usually associated with the secretions of the human body) is here combined with a more classic *vertige de l'abîme* – and apart from obvious allusions to Poesque and Lovecraftian chasms we are reminded of Heidegger's well-known comment upon such an abysmal ontology in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953, 1959): "Man embarks on the groundless deep, forsaking the solid land. He sets sail not upon bright, smooth waters, but amid the storms of winter" (Heidegger 1959: 153). Danielewski's characters ultimately find it extremely difficult to come to terms with this House of Fear.

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[12] Actually, this subterranean landscape has been prefigured more than a century earlier in one of Roderick Usher's paintings: "A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (Poe 2000: 405–6).

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